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ABSTRACT

A survey examined the use of coping mechanisms by rural Saskatchewan principals and principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of coping mechanisms used. A modified form of the Ways of Coping questionnaire was mailed to 110 rural principals throughout Saskatchewan (Canada); 48 usable responses were returned. The questionnaire focused on eight types of coping mechanisms: confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal. Virtually all respondents took 0-5 sick days in a school year; 40 percent reported enrollments of less than 100 students; and 66 percent did not have the assistance of a vice-principal. About two-thirds of principals rated their own ability to cope with the stresses of the principalship as "quite effective." The eight types of coping mechanisms were ranked very similarly with regard to use and effectiveness. Planful problem solving was rated the most used and the most effective type of mechanism; escape-avoidance was rated least used and least effective. School size was related to the effectiveness of four types of mechanisms, while the use or effectiveness of various types of mechanisms was related to principal's educational qualifications, school grade-span, and presence or absence of a vice-principal. Contains 60 references and lists of questionnaire statements associated with each type of coping mechanism. (SV)

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ED 399 103

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

# Coping Mechanisms Used by Rural Principals

SSTA RESEARCH CENTRE REPORT: #95-13 DATE: Nov 1995

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This report is a summary of a master's thesis entitled **Coping Mechanisms Used by Rural Principals in Saskatchewan in Response to Stressful Events** by Richard Buettner.

The purpose of the study was to determine the nature of the coping with stress mechanisms used by rural principals practicing educational administration. Information from the study was obtained from a random sample of 110 rural Saskatchewan principals.

Data on principals' responses about frequency of use and effectiveness of various coping mechanisms were collected by use of a self-administered questionnaire. The primary instrument used to gather the data was the revised Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Lazarus & Folkman, 1988) which was further modified for the purposes of this study.

Analyses of the data indicated that there were variances in both the frequency of use and effectiveness of various copying mechanisms. The findings of this study are summarized in this report.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

The role of the principal has been the focus of many studies and reports in Saskatchewan in the past number of years. Each of these works has taken a different perspective on the principal's role.

Sangster (1988) reported significant identifiable variables affecting change in principalships in Saskatchewan. Sangster's study determined that most principals felt a change of principalship to a different school was a satisfactory or very positive experience but that there were negative factors affecting the process of principalship change. McKague (1986) investigated disturbing facts about the turnover of principals in Region 1 in Southeast Saskatchewan. Of turnovers studied by McKague, at least six of the reported 24 administrative changes in 14 rural school divisions were a direct result of pressure to resign the position. Two of the administrators left teaching entirely while the remainder found other positions.

The Income Continuance Plan Report of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (1994) reported a fourteen year accumulated total of 412 claims from teachers, including administrators, with mental/emotional, and heart and circulatory medical conditions. The number of claimants with a mental/emotional condition in 1978/79 was 7 and in 1990/91 this number increased to 44 - an increase of 529%. These statistics are based on a relatively constant number of teachers employed in Saskatchewan over the same time span. The statistics indicate that the claims related to mental/emotional, and heart and circulatory medical conditions comprise up to 42% of all claims incurred by the Income Continuance Plan in the years 1991-92.

## Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of the study was to determine the nature of coping with stress mechanisms used by rural principals practising educational administration in the province of Saskatchewan during the 1993-94 school year. The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What frequency of use of various coping with stress mechanisms is reported by principals?

2. How do principals perceive the degree of effectiveness of various coping mechanisms?

3. Is there a difference between the degree of use and effectiveness of any particular way of coping?

4. Is there any difference in the degree of use or effectiveness of various coping mechanisms as determined by years of experience as a principal, academic qualifications, illness, organization of the school, number of students, and presence of vice-principals?

5. Is there a relationship between principal's self-rated ability to cope with stress and the use and effectiveness of specific coping mechanisms?

Justification of the Study

This study was proposed in order to satisfy a personal interest as well as to provide the Saskatchewan educational community with a broader perspective and clearer understanding of existing use of coping mechanisms by rural principals. Furthermore, little research has been done on the perceptions of educational administrators on the frequency of use or effectiveness of coping mechanisms related to their occupation.

This study was suggested, in part, because Dewe (1986) believed coping with stress mechanisms and stress itself are ultimately linked and, thus, stressful situations are largely determined by the ability to deal appropriately with them. He stated we ought to be just as concerned with developing information on coping as we have been on detailing and considering the causes and consequences of occupational stress. Thus, Dewe infers that exploring the various ways in which individuals cope with distress may be as useful as researching stress itself. Therefore, the use and successfulness, or effectiveness of the coping strategy may be just as important as the intensity of the stressor.

Furthermore, Zaccaro and Riley (1987) state that ineffective coping with high levels of stressors has negative effects on the person's and organization's ability to respond to additional stress. The resulting strain negatively influences future attempts at coping thus diminishing the likelihood of success. In some respects, the individual is forced into a downward spiral whereby the preceding pattern of poor performance further decreases the chances for an upturn in performance. This poor performance may be accompanied by delays, errors, tardiness, absenteeism and ill-health. Maslach and Jackson (1984) believe that if intense stressors are persistent over a long period of time, the individual may cope by withdrawing emotionally with a possibility that burnout will follow. All of these outcomes are dysfunctional for the organization. Thus there is a need for research to determine if effective coping strategies exist and if so, what they are.

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Theory and Research Related to the Concept of Coping Definitions

One of the problems encountered in the literature is the multitude of definitions related to the concept of coping (Cohen & Lazarus, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b; McGrath, 1970; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Schuler, 1984; Yackel, 1983). Coping is primarily a psychological concept and although there are many definitions all appear to share a basic thought that coping is a struggle with demands, conflicts and emotions. The Webster New World Dictionary (1984) defines coping as "1. to fight or contend (with) successfully or on equal terms 2. to deal with problems, troubles, etc." (p. 313). This is different than defense mechanisms which the Webster New World Dictionary (1984) defines to be "... any behaviour or thought process unconsciously brought into use by an individual to protect himself against painful or anxiety-provoking feelings, impulses, perceptions, etc." (p. 370). The important distinction is that coping involves some degree of thought by the individual.

Cohen and Lazarus (1979) defined coping as the action-orientated and intrapsychic efforts to manage environmental and internal demands, and conflicts among them, which tax or exceed a person's resources. Later, Lazarus and Folkman (1984a) revised this definition to be the constantly changing cognitive and behaviourial efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. Within this definition is the inclusion of both defensive and coping strategies.

## Functions of Coping

In addition, different functions of coping appear in the literature (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984a; Mechanic, 1974; Moos & Billings 1982; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; White, 1974; Zaccaro & Riley, 1987). Lazarus and Folkman (1984a) make the distinction between two functions of coping although both are used in most situations. Problem-focussed coping deals with managing or altering the problem causing the distress. These problems may arise from internal or environmental demands that create threat such as when an individual studies for an examination or is about to take action by confronting a Hallowe'en prangster. Emotion-focussed coping is directed at regulating the affective responses to a problem. Efforts are made to modify the distress that accompanies the threat. Examples of this effort might be, for example, to deny that the threat exists or to consume alcohol to excess. Lazarus and Folkman (1984a) state that how the individual appraises a situation influences how that individual will cope with the distressful encounter.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) state that coping refers to behaviour that protects people from being psychologically harmed by problematic social experiences. This protective function is exercised in three ways; by eliminating or modifying conditions giving rise to the problems, by perceptually controlling the meaning of the experience such that the character of the problem is neutralized and, by keeping the emotional consequences within manageable bounds.

## Outcomes of Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984a) state that a coping function refers to the purpose a strategy serves; outcome refers to the effect a strategy has. This statement indicates that functions are not defined in terms of outcomes and are independent of each other. Thus, it is possible that a certain coping function may result in different coping outcomes, although one might expect a given function to have a given outcome.

Outcomes of coping have been categorized into three domains (Cohen 1979; Cohen & Lazarus 1979). The first, psychological outcomes, encompasses emotional reactions, general well-being, and performance on tasks. The second, social outcomes, involves changes in interpersonal relationships and in the ability to fulfill social roles. The third outcome, physiological, categorizes short term changes such as in the nervous or immune system and hormones and long term changes such as in coronary heart disease.

## Coping Efficacy

Schuler (1984) proposes that effective coping depends upon an individual's cognitive skills. The individual must analyze a stress situation, develop and select a coping strategy, implement the strategy, and then get feedback for the purpose of evaluation. Effective coping depends on reducing uncertainty or importance associated with the situation, reducing the length of the stress situation, or reducing the effects on the individual experiencing the stress. Further, when the individual is ready to make a choice of a coping strategy, his choice is dependent on four factors: (1) the costs and benefits of each strategy, (2) environmental constraints or support, (3) individual experience, and (4) individual attributes. Schuler (1984) advocates the utilization of appropriate strategies for potential application and believes the evaluation of the typology of coping strategies is critical to the understanding of coping. On a broader perspective, Rodin, Bohm & Wack (1982) found that it is because of variations in coping efficacy that people exposed to similar life strains may experience quite different levels of stress.

In the first part of a three year longitudinal study by Howard, Rechnitzer & Cunningham (1975), managers from different companies based in London, Ontario were examined. Respondents were asked to indicate the use and effectiveness of ten different

coping techniques. As well, indicators of the health and amount of stress experienced by respondents were collected. In addition, respondents were classified into Type A or Type B behaviour patterns as described by Friedman and Rosenman (1974).

The researchers found the most effective coping techniques seemed to be the ones that were the most used. The sample was divided into a low stress group and a high stress group. The successful copers (low stress group) had an action-orientated, preventative concern about stress, a greater awareness of their psycho-physiological capacities, and a problem-solving orientation - characterized as working smarter. The high stress group would change the strategy of the attack on their work or change to a different work activity - characterized as working harder, in other words, changing gears or keeping the foot on the accelerator. There were no significant differences between Type A and Type B respondents except on three coping techniques. Howard, Rechnitzer & Cunningham (1975) found that compartmentalizing work and non-work activities and talking through with the spouse were associated with low coronary risk. Changing to a different work activity was associated with high coronary risk.

Measurement of Coping

One of the difficulties within the area of the measurement of coping has been the different approaches to the problem. Two approaches have surfaced - episodic or situational assessment and trait or dispositional assessment. Trait measures of coping refer to an individual's habitual or particular way to deal with a variety of stressful encounters. These traits or dispositions are aligned to the personality of that individual (Cohen, 1987). Trait assessment refers to an enduring property of a person or a disposition to respond in a certain way under a variety of circumstances. Episodic measures of coping deal with the strategies individuals actually use in a particular stressful situation, that is, what the person does in a particular encounter. The important aspect of episodic coping is that it is characterized by responses in which there can be a flow of events.

Trait measurement has been criticized for assuming consistency in coping behaviour (Cohen & Lazarus, 1979). Furthermore, Cohen (1987) indicates coping traits do not seem to be predictive of how individuals actually cope in stressful situations. Lazarus and Folkman (1984b) state that the measurement of coping traits have modest predictive value with respect to the coping process. In an earlier study, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found some stability in the use of coping responses for an individual across episodes but in general, subjects were characterized more by variability than by stability in coping patterns. As well, since coping is a process, it changes over time. A person may use an emotion-focussed strategy and then shift to a problem-focussed strategy or vice versa.

Coping Mechanisms in Education

Swent (1983) reported on the results of a study in the state of Oregon where 1245 administrators reported the way they handled the tensions and pressures of their jobs. The activities were divided into three major areas: physiological activities, cognitive and psychological activities and interpersonal and organizational activities. Clearly, activities of a physiological type constituted the most frequent stress-reduction technique (65%), and in particular, more than 85% of these respondents used some form of exercise or physical labor. In addition, 22% of the responses indicated coping strategies in the cognitive/psychological area with more than half of these responses related to separating one's sense of self from one's environment. The study found a low level (12%) of reported coping responses characterized as interpersonal or organizational management skills. Swent concluded that stress affects each individual differently and a variety of coping techniques should be adapted to that individual.

Bailey, Fillos & Kelly (1987) in a study in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States examined exemplary principals, stress and how they cope. A structured interview was devised to examine the ability of these principals to cope with stress. Coping behaviours were categorized into physiological (exercise, health practices, diet, relaxation forms, sleep), socio-psychological (therapy, friends, support groups, family solitude, church), avocational/recreational (hobbies, sports, special interests) and management skills (training, attendance at conferences, graduate work, personal growth experiences).

Bailey et al., (1987) found exemplary principals are more likely to use avocational/recreational and management skill approaches to coping than physiological or socio-psychological approaches. In general, the principals scored higher in the socio-psychological category than in the physiological category. The avocational/recreational area was considered very important to all. As well, all the principals in the sample, engaged in activities in the management skill area. The study found that these exemplary principals developed strong stress coping strategies through management skills.

Diederich (1987) identified the significant issues, conflicts and experiences which occurred during the process secondary school teachers underwent in their first year as school administrators in the state of Ohio. Responses to the same questions asked in August (before school began) and in October (after two months in administration) yielded significant differences. When asked in August how they expected to cope with this change in their career, the new administrators listed working hard, keep learning, take things slowly, building cooperation throughout the institution, learning from mistakes, being organized, anticipating problems and keeping a calendar. When asked in October, their coping took external and internal form. Some spoke of intellectual, thoughtful

approaches, of attempts to balance the negatives and positives and of taking time and space away. Other approaches included enjoying the pace, finding release in sports and emoting at home or with friends.

When asked in August to appraise their own use of coping strategies they talked about success, perceptions, responsibility, a starting over again feeling and hopefulness. In October, responses to appraise their own use of coping strategies included positive reasons in both the personal and professional domains. However, their negative feelings related to the loss of one's previous support system and their desire for help. They indicated that an on-going support system, an inservice program, and opportunities for space, fun and time to be away would be important.

Yackel (1983), in a study of male principals in rural Saskatchewan, determined there was no relationship between leadership style, administrative stress and the role of coping methods employed. The sample was divided into a relationship-orientated group and a task-orientated group (on the basis of the Least Preferred Co-worker rating scale) and statistically compared to the frequency and intensity of administrative stress. Results indicated that task-orientated principals and relationship-orientated principals perceived themselves similarly in terms of total frequency and intensity of administrative stress they experience.

Respondents were asked to rank a maximum of three methods of coping with stress used most frequently from a list of 16 coping mechanisms supplied on the survey questionnaire. An opportunity was given to respondents to supply any other coping mechanisms on the questionnaire. The study concluded that the choice of coping mechanisms is not based solely on an individual's broad motivational structure of task or person orientation as had been predicted by the literature review by Yackel (1983). The study also found that methods of coping are not employed as a response to the specific nature of stressors experienced, but rather as a general response. Yackel speculated that the selection of coping methods is governed by reasons such as personal likes and dislikes, past experience, accessibility, cost, social acceptability and peer influence.

Hiebert and Basserman (1986) assessed the relationship of demands, ability to cope, and stress in a study of elementary school principals in British Columbia. Respondents rated the frequency, intensity, and effectiveness (degree to which it was mastered) of 36 situations. It was reported this group of principals viewed their jobs as being moderately stressful adding that mid-fall and just after Christmas are the least demanding times, while the most demanding time was at the end of the school year. The overall average of the intensity scale indicated a mild to moderate amount of stress, in other words, most elementary principals did not find their jobs highly stressful nor stress free. Hiebert and Basserman stated that their analysis of demands that occur most

frequently and least frequently were similar in nature to those faced by principals in previous studies conducted in the United States.

In the area of coping effectiveness, Hiebert and Basserman reported that principals saw themselves as coping very effectively with the demands of their job. In fact, an inverse relationship was found between the intensity of their stressful reactions to situations and their perceived ability to cope with those situations. In other words, principals who perceived themselves as coping effectively with the demands they faced generally were not very stressed. Hiebert and Basserman found no statistically reliable differences on any of the demographic dimensions with the frequency, intensity, and coping effectiveness scales.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### The Population and Sample

In Saskatchewan, there are two basic school systems: The Roman Catholic Separate School System and the Public School System, whether it be city or rural. The Saskatchewan Department of Education keeps a list of private, public and separate, city and rural school principals currently practicing in Saskatchewan across all grade levels employed during each school year. For this study the population consisted of 571 rural Saskatchewan school principals as listed in the 1992-93 Saskatchewan Register of Schools.

The survey consisting of a cover letter and the questionnaire was mailed to 110 principals and 51 of these surveys were returned. Three of the returns were not completed and were considered unusable. Follow-up letters were not used since the resulting 48 usable responses were considered sufficient for data analysis.

### Ethics of Subject Management

Approval to conduct the research was received from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of Regina. Thirty-five Directors of Education granted permission to contact rural principals in their jurisdiction. The selected principals were contacted by mail. Respondents were not requested to identify their employer or themselves and anonymity of response was assured.

### The Instrument

The primary instrument used to gather data for this study was the Ways of Coping

questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). The questionnaire was modified to determine the frequency and effectiveness of various coping mechanisms used by principals.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. In the first section, respondents were asked to focus their attention by thinking about a critical event which had recently occurred in their occupation as a rural principal in which they felt distress. Then, the respondent was asked to describe what happened in a few brief sentences and to provide a self-rating of their ability to cope with stress.

The instructions for the second section on the primary instrument were to read each item and indicate, by circling the appropriate category, to what extent a coping statement was used and and to what extent it was effective in the situation just described. The third section of the questionnaire requested demographic information such as years of experience, highest academic degree held, usual number of sick days taken in a school year, organization of the school, number of students enrolled in the school and whether a vice-principal was assigned to the school.

The main body or second section of the questionnaire contained 66 coping statements reflecting a wide range of thoughts and actions that people use to deal with taxing events. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) identified eight varieties of coping or scales in the Ways of Coping questionnaire.

Fifty of the items on the questionnaire are divided into eight empirically-constructed scales. The scales are described as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Confrontive Coping (Scale 1) | describes aggressive efforts to alter the situation and suggests some degree of hostility and risk-taking. |
| Distancing (Scale 2) | describes cognitive efforts to detach oneself and to minimize the significance of the situation. |
| Self-Controlling (Scale 3) | describes efforts to regulate one's own feelings. |
| Seeking Social Support (Scale 4) | describes efforts to seek informational support, tangible support, and emotional support. |
| Accepting Responsibility (Scale 5) | acknowledges one's own role in the problem with a concomitant theme of trying to put things right. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Escape-Avoidance (Scale 6) | describes wishful thinking and behaviourial efforts to escape or avoid the problem. Items on this scale contrast with those on the Distancing scale, which suggests detachment. |
| Planful Problem Solving (Scale 7) | describes deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation, coupled with an analytic approach to solving the problem. |
| Positive Reappraisal (Scale 8) | describes efforts to create positive meaning by focusing on personal growth. It also has a religious dimension. |

The response format for the Use section of the questionnaire was a 4-point Likert type scale ( 0 = not used, 1 = used somewhat, 2 = used quite a bit, 3 = used a great deal). The response format for the Effective section was a 4-point Likert type scale ( 0 = not effective, 1 = somewhat effective, 2 = quite a bit effective, 3 = very effective).

Data Analysis Method

The frequency of use and effectiveness of each coping statement and each scale of coping strategies were calculated for the sample. Coping statements and scales with extreme high or low frequency responses are reported.

In addition, the response mean of each of the 66 coping statements and eight coping scales is determined for the sample for both the Use and Effectiveness sections. Significant differences, using a 2-tailed test of probability at the 0.05 level, in the mean response of the use and effectiveness of a particular way of coping and each scale of strategies are reported.

Finally, the number of effective coping behaviours that are reported by principals is determined for each respondent by calculating the frequency to which respondents select particular ways of coping as being quite effective or very effective. Predominant scales within the instrument that contain these effective coping behaviours are determined as well.

In order to determine significant differences, if any, between the degree of use or effectiveness of various coping scales and the demographic data, the median response for the degree of use and effectiveness of the eight coping scales and the median response for each demographic variable was calculated. The data were crosstabulated and Chi square

tests of significance calculated. A similar procedure was used to analyze the self-rated effectiveness of principals to cope with stress and the degree of use or effectiveness of specific coping mechanisms.

## RESULTS

### Findings of the Study

1. The majority (46.8%) of the participating principals had 0 - 5 years of rural administrative experience.

2. Most (63.8%) of the participating principals reported having an academic degree less than a Masters.

3. The usual number of sick days taken by vast majority (95.7%) of participating principals was 0 - 5 days in a school year.

4. Most (34.0%) of the participating principals administrated Kindergarten to Grade 9 schools following closely by the next group (27.7%) of principals who administrated Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools.

5. In most (40.4%) cases, participating principals reported 1 - 100 students enrolled in their school.

6. The majority (66.0%) of participating principals reported not to have the assistance of a vice-principal in their school.

7. Most (66.7%) principals self-rated their ability to cope with the stresses of the principalship to be "quite effective".

8. Planful Problem Solving was the most used coping scale and Escape-Avoidance was the least used coping scale. Principals reported somewhat, quite a bit, or a great deal of use of five of the eight coping scales. As well, there was considerable variance among the degree of use of the coping mechanisms and coping scales.

9. Planful Problem Solving was the most effective coping scale and Escape-Avoidance was the least effective coping scale. Principals reported that six of the eight coping scales were somewhat, quite, or very effective for them. As well,

TABLE 1

Ranked Order Of Use Of A Particular Coping Scale
Based Upon Mean Response[1]

| COPING SCALE | | MEAN[2] | RANK |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | Planful Problem Solving | 1.75 | 1 |
| 3 | Self-Controlling | 1.46 | 2 |
| 4 | Seeking Social Support | 1.44 | 3 |
| 8 | Positive Reappraisal | 1.09 | 4 |
| 1 | Confrontive Coping | 1.01 | 5 |
| 2 | Distancing | 0.76 | 6 |
| 5 | Accepting Responsibility | 0.52 | 7 |
| 6 | Escape-Avoidance | 0.43 | 8 |

there was considerable variance among the degree of effectiveness of the coping mechanisms and coping scales.

10. The same four coping scales, Planful Problem Solving, Self-Controlling, Seeking Social Support, and Positive Reappraisal, ranked in the top four in both the use and effectiveness sections. Conversely, the same four coping scales, Confrontive Coping, Distancing, Accepting Responsibility, and Escape-Avoidance, ranked in the bottom four in both the use and effectiveness sections.

11. Significant differences between the use and effectiveness of six of the eight coping scales were noted. These coping scales included Confrontive Coping, Distancing, Seeking Social Support, Accepting Responsibility, Planful Problem Solving, and Positive Reappraisal.

[1]scale: 0 = not used, 1 = used somewhat, 2 = used quite a bit, 3 = used a great deal

[2]based on N = 48 and rounded to nearest hundredth

TABLE 2

Ranked Order Of Effectiveness Of A Particular Coping Scale
Based Upon Mean Response[3]

| COPING SCALE | | MEAN[4] | RANK |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | Planful Problem Solving | 1.85 | 1 |
| 4 | Seeking Social Support | 1.70 | 2 |
| 3 | Self-Controlling | 1.53 | 3 |
| 8 | Positive Reappraisal | 1.41 | 4 |
| 1 | Confrontive Coping | 1.23 | 5 |
| 2 | Distancing | 1.11 | 6 |
| 5 | Accepting Responsibility | 0.86 | 7 |
| 6 | Escape-Avoidance | 0.61 | 8 |

12. There was no significant relationship in the use or effectiveness of any coping scale and two of the demographic variables considered in this study. These two variables are number of years of administrative experience and usual number of sick days taken in a school year.

13. There was a significant relationship between the Accepting Responsibility coping scale and the academic qualifications of the rural principals.

14. There was a significant relationship between the use of the Distancing coping scale and organization of the school by grades.

15. There were significant relationships between the effectiveness of four coping scales, Confrontive Coping, Self-Controlling, Seeking Social Support, and Planful Problem Solving, and the number of students enrolled in the school.

[3]scale: 0 = not effective, 1 = somewhat effective, 2 = quite effective, 3 = very effective

[4]based on N = 48 and rounded to nearest hundredth

TABLE 3

Coping Scales With Significant Differences With
Their Use And Effectiveness Compared to a Demographic Variable

| Demographic Variable | Use of | Effectiveness of |
|---|---|---|
| Number of Years of Administrative Experience | Nil | Nil |
| Highest Academic Degree Held | Accepting Responsibility | Nil |
| Usual Number of Sick Days Taken in a School Year | Nil | Nil |
| Organization of School by Grades | Distancing | Nil |
| Number of students Enrolled | Nil | Confrontive Coping, Self-Controlling, Seeking Social Support, Planful Problem Solving |
| Presence or absence of a Vice-Principal | Self-Controlling | Self-Controlling, Planful Problem Solving |

16. There was a significant relationship between the use and effectiveness of the Self-Controlling coping scale and the effectiveness of the Planful Problem Solving coping scale and whether or not the principal had the assistance of a vice-principal.

17. There was a significant relationship between the use of the Accepting Responsibility and Planful Problem Solving coping scales and the self-rated effectiveness of principals to cope with the stresses of the principalship.

Discussion of the Findings

In the demographic part of the survey instrument, rural principals reported their academic qualifications. It was an interesting finding that 36.2% of rural principals of the sample held Master's degrees. This would support a view that rural principals are well-educated professionals. In addition, it was interesting to note that 95.7% of rural principals usually take 0 - 5 sick days during the school year. As well, no rural principal reported taking more than 11 or more days of sick leave during the school year. This data supports the statement that rural principals are not abusive of sick leave provisions of the provincial collective bargaining agreement between the boards of education and the government of Saskatchewan, and the teachers of Saskatchewan.

The study indicated that principals use a number of coping mechanisms during the performance of their duties. Thirty-seven of the listed 66 coping mechanisms were used somewhat or quite a bit of the time. The remaining 29 coping mechanisms recorded some degree of use, based upon the mean response.

In addition, the study found that some of these coping mechanisms were more effective than others in relieving the distress associated with a particular incident in the school. Thirty-four of the 66 coping mechanisms were somewhat or quite effective. The remaining 32 coping mechanisms recorded some degree of effectiveness based upon the mean response. Again, this clearly indicated that there were differences in the effectiveness of particular coping mechanisms as reported by rural principals.

These findings about variation in the use and effectiveness of various coping mechanisms are consistent with the findings of other studies earlier identified in the literature review (Bailey et al., 1987; Diederich, 1987; Gmelch, 1975; Howard et al., 1975; Rodin et al., 1982; Swent, 1983; Yackel, 1983). For example, the statement by Howard, Rechnitzer & Cunningham (1975), "the indication would seem to be that the most effective techniques tend to be among the most used" (p. 317) would also apply to this study. Swent (1983) found in a study of 953 administrators that approximately 66% of the sample used physiological stress reduction activities, 22% used

cognitive/psychological strategies, and nearly 12% used interpersonal/organizational activities. Swent goes on to state that a variety of coping techniques are needed to assist individuals. Yackel's (1983) study found a variation in the frequency of use of various coping mechanisms based upon the first, second, and third most frequent mechanism employed for coping with stress in a study of 122 male rural principals. Gmelch (1975) states that coping methods that work best for many may not be the answer for all school administrators.

The surfacing of the Planful Problem Solving coping scale as the most used and most effective coping scale by participating principals is noteworthy. It ranked the highest in both the use and effectiveness responses. Planful Problem Solving describes aggressive efforts to alter the situation and suggests some degree of hostility and risk-taking.

This finding may have resulted from the principals' recognition that one of their roles is to ameliorate conflict situations which arise in their educational institutions. Section 175 (h) of The Education Act (1978) deals with the duties of principals and states that the principal shall "... give such direction to members of the staff and to pupils as may be necessary to maintain the good order, harmony and efficiency of the school;". A principal's recognition of this duty would compel his/her actions to alter any distressful situation. On the other hand, it may also be socially desirable for principals to indicate that they utilize problem solving strategies though whether they actually do or not is another question. The socially desirable question may not be as important as it first appears. One study assessed the effect of social desirability on stated preferences for various coping mechanisms. Sidle et al. (1969) determined that pencil-and-paper measures are capable of gaining information with respect to less-socially-approved ways of coping.

The two coping scales, Seeking Social Support and Self-Controlling, also ranked near the top in both the use and effectiveness sections of three of the eight coping scales. This finding may have resulted from the notion that administrators feel they need support from their colleagues, superordinates and subordinates while performing the duties of the principalship. This may also account for the generally agreed statement that principals favour the assistance of a vice-principal. Seeking Social Support describes efforts to seek informational support, tangible support, and emotional support. One function of the vice-principal may be to provide support to the principal during distressful encounters. When principals are asked to list duties or job descriptions of vice-principals, it is not uncommon to notice "lending an ear" to the principal or acting as a "sounding board" as a listed duty. The surfacing of the coping scale Seeking Social Support serves to elevate the importance of the vice-principal role. The Self-Controlling scale describes efforts to regulate one's own feelings. Since it would be highly desirable for principals to see

themselves or to be perceived by others in the school community as being in control during a stressful situation, it would follow that this coping scale would be prevalent.

In much the same way, the ranking of the Escape-Avoidance scale at the bottom of the rankings in both the use and effectiveness sections would make sense. Escape-Avoidance describes wishful thinking and behaviourial efforts to escape or avoid the problem. It would be likely that if a principal avoids a stressful situation, then there would be a lesser likelihood that one would be in control - either in reality or in the perception of others, although it could be argued that a principal may choose to purposely avoid a stressful situation because the administrator's involvement may, in fact, escalate the distress. The reasons for using escape-avoidance mechanisms would be important to know.

It was interesting to note that significant differences were identified between the use and effectiveness of six of the eight coping scales. This may indicate that the effectiveness of particular coping mechanisms (as measured collectively in coping scales) is more important than their use. That is, the response mean of the effectiveness of each coping scale was higher than the response mean of the use of the same coping scale. It is puzzling to the researcher why this would be the case. It is difficult to comprehend why all coping scales would be rated more effective when compared to their use. Did respondents generally view all coping mechanisms as being effective? Or did principals know that when a particular coping mechanism would not be used, the likelihood of a more successful outcome would be increased, thereby making their choice of coping mechanisms effective? Or is it human nature to report how little stress we have and "play down" the use of coping mechanisms, and then feel more positive about our perceived solutions?

One demographic variable, the number of students enrolled in the school, showed the greatest number of significant relationships to the eight coping scales. The number of students enrolled in the school was associated with four of the eight coping scales when comparing median responses of the use and effectiveness of each coping scale with the median response of that variable. These four coping scales were Confrontive Coping, Self-Controlling, Seeking Social Support, Planful Problem Solving. This is a different finding than the study done by Hiebert and Basserman (1986) in which no statistically reliable differences were found on any of the demographic dimensions with the frequency, intensity, and coping effectiveness scales.

This finding about the significance of the number of students enrolled in the school may mean the greater the number of students, the greater the potential for an increased number of stressors. This would, in turn, present a greater need for the principal to use more effective coping mechanisms to reduce the intensity of the stressors. It should be

noted that schools with more students would tend to have a vice-principal. The perception or practice of central office administrators and boards of education that small schools do not need vice-principals may have some validity, since this study did find that the use and effectiveness of some coping scales differed significantly with number of students enrolled in the school. If it was desirable to increase the personal contact of administrators with students and staff in a school, then the presence of a vice-principal would be a logical choice.

The researcher was disappointed to find that the tests of significance between absence or presence of a vice-principal and the coping scales did not yield more significant relationships. It had been anticipated that this demographic variable, presence or absence of a vice-principal, would have had more significant relationships than the other demographic variables. Nonetheless, this finding is conclusive since the mean response of rural principals with vice-principals differed significantly from the mean response of rural principals without the assistance of vice-principals in three instances - the use of the Self-Controlling scale, the effectiveness of the Self-Controlling scale, and the effectiveness of the Planful Problem Solving scale. It is also noteworthy that of all the demographic variables considered in this study, the presence or absence of a vice-principal is the only demographic variable in which there was a significant relationship on both the use and effectiveness sections. As well, the Self-Controlling scale was the only scale that showed significant relationships when compared to two different demographic variables - the presence or absence of a vice-principal and the number of students enrolled in the school. The researcher believes the surfacing of the Self-Controlling scale may be as important as the Planful Problem Solving scale and, thus needs to be fully considered.

As stated earlier, the mean response of rural principals with vice-principals differed significantly from the mean response of rural principals without the assistance of vice-principals on the Self-Controlling scale. This difference between the two groups in the use and effectiveness of this scale is extremely important. The Self-Controlling scale deals the regulation of one's own feelings. Examination of the coping mechanisms grouped within this coping scale is helpful. The Self-Controlling scale includes coping mechanisms such as trying not to burn bridges, keeping feelings to oneself, not acting too hastily, keeping others from interfering, going over in one's mind what to say or do, and modelling oneself on how an admired person would handle the situation.

This finding begs the question as to why principals without the assistance of vice-principals respond significantly differently than principals with the assistance of vice-principals. Are rural principals who do not have vice-principals forced to be more or less self-regulating of their own feelings in their workplace? Common sense would indicate that keeping one's feelings to oneself may not be particularly helpful to oneself, but it is

another question whether it is conducive to alleviating some of the personal distress associated with a troublesome event in the school or bringing about a solution to a difficult problem. It is entirely possible that a rural principal without the assistance of a vice-principal must regulate his/her own feelings moreso during distressful encounters than compared to a colleague who has the assistance of a vice-principal. If this was the case, then it would be important to know whether this self-regulation of feelings affects the judgment of the principal when making educational and administrative decisions in the school.

One finding of this study indicated that most (66.7%) principals reported their ability to cope with stress to be "quite effective". Yet, on both the use or effectiveness sections of the questionnaire, principals responded primarily with "somewhat" or "quite a bit". This finding is somewhat perplexing to the researcher. It may be that principals simply overrated their ability when asked how effectively they cope with the stresses of the principalship. It is sometimes said that humans often generalize, hence principals may see themselves as being able to function in a variety of situations, but only when they become immersed in a conflict or stressor, do they really recognize their deficiencies or limitations. Perhaps when principals were asked to rate their coping effectiveness, they, consciously or unconsciously, only identified the successful or effective coping mechanisms and did not think about those that were not successful. By asking the principals to respond to 66 different coping mechanisms on the questionnaire, a broader range would be considered with the consequence that more unsuccessful or ineffective mechanisms would be brought to the attention of the respondent.

## CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions of the Study

The conclusions presented have emanated from the evidence provided by this study. These conclusions may be regarded as an attempt to answer the questions concerning the use and effectiveness of various coping mechanisms.

1. It was concluded that principals used a number of coping mechanisms during the performance of their duties. In addition, some of these coping mechanisms are more effective than others when associated with a particular stressful incident in the school.

2. It was concluded there were significant differences between the perceived use and effectiveness of most (6) of the eight coping scales when rural principals deal with stressful situations in their schools.

3. It was concluded that the scale of Planful Problem Solving was reported to be the most used and most effective coping scale by participating principals. In fact, this is consistent with the research literature. Planful Problem Solving deals with deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation, coupled with an analytic approach to solving the problem.

4. It was concluded that the coping scales, Seeking Social Support and Self-Controlling, are extremely important to rural administrators. This conclusion was based on the evidence that these coping scales were reported to be either the second or third most frequently used or most effective among principals participating in this study.

5. It was concluded that two demographic variables, the number of years of administrative experience and the usual number of sick days taken by the principal, are not significant when compared to either the use or effectiveness of coping scales.

6. It was concluded that the highest academic degree held by the principal and the organization of the school by grades yielded less than conclusive results about the use or effectiveness of various coping mechanisms.

7. It was concluded that only one demographic variable, number of students enrolled in the school, yielded the most conclusive results when determining the effectiveness of various coping mechanisms.

8. It was concluded that the demographic variable, presence or absense of a vice-principal in the rural school, yielded the next most conclusive results when determining the effectiveness of various coping mechanisms.

9. It was concluded that rural principals responded differently about their self-rated ability to cope with the stresses of the rural principalship compared to their actual responses to the coping mechanisms of two coping scales on the questionnaire.

## Implications

As a result of this study, four main implications arose. These implications are addressed to the boards of education and rural Saskatchewan principals. These implications assume that each and every rural principal will encounter distressful situations in the day-to-day practices of administrating a school.

First, boards of education need to recognize the certainty of distress, the nature of stress producing stressors, and the necessity to provide support for all principals in their

employ. This support could take the form of formal inservice opportunities whereby principals can learn to recognize, analyze their patterns of coping when involved in a situation and consider more effective alternatives to their normal response patterns.

Second, opportunities for frequent and purposeful dialogue should be provided whereby principals can openly communicate their frustrations and feelings in relation to a particular circumstance. Peer discussion would have the potential to alleviate tension arising from distressful events in schools.

A third implication, specific to schools that do not have the services of a vice-principal, is that the absence of a vice-principal hinders the kind of communication needed during conflict situations. Principals need to be able to vent their feelings and frustrations and discuss their ideas and alternatives with someone who will keep the dialogue confidential. Perhaps, principals would be well advised to establish formal and informal lines of communication with their colleagues within or outside of their school division, in order to share their personal thoughts in relation to distressful situations.

A fourth implication is that the use and effectiveness of coping mechanisms are difficult to measure. This study illustrates considerable variations in the degree of use and effectiveness of coping mechanisms. It is likely that during any distress situation in a school, a great number of factors are involved. The sheer number of these factors combined with the complex nature of human interactions contribute to multi-linked relationships and additional complexity.

## Recommendations for Practice

Based on the evidence of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for practice.

1. Administrators should place a high degree of emphasis on problem solving techniques during professional development activities. It is clear that the coping scale, Planful Problem Solving, appeared most often in the data analysis of this study. It was most often linked to significant relationships among demographic variables.

2. Boards of education which terminate the services of vice-principals need to fully consider the implications of their decision. If a decision is made to proceed with such terminations, there is also a need to implement measures in the transition to single-administrator schools that provide principals with alternative modes of communication and consultation.

3. As the number of students enrolled in a school increases, boards of education and directors of education need to become more receptive and responsive to the needs of the principal.

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APPENDIX A

Coping Scales

| Scale | Questionnaire Number and Coping Statement |
|---|---|
| Scale 1: Confrontive Coping | |
| | 6. I did something which I didn't think would work, but at least I was doing something. |
| | 7. Tried to get the person responsible to change his or her mind. |
| | 17. I expressed anger to the person(s) who caused the problem. |
| | 28. I let my feelings out somehow. |
| | 34. Took a big chance or did something very risky. |
| | 46. Stood my ground and fought for what I wanted. |
| Scale 2: Distancing | |
| | 12. Went along with fate; sometimes I just have bad luck. |
| | 13. Went on as if nothing had happened. |
| | 15. Looked for the silver lining, so to speak; tried to look on the bright side of things. |
| | 21. Tried to forget the whole thing. |
| | 41. Didn't let it get to me; refused to think about it too much. |
| | 44. Made light of the situation; refused to get too serious about it. |
| Scale 3: Self-Controlling | |
| | 10. Tried not to burn my bridges, but leave things open somewhat. |
| | 14. I tried to keep my feelings to myself. |
| | 35. I tried not to act too hastily or follow my first hunch. |
| | 43. Kept others from knowing how bad things were. |
| | 54. I tried to keep my feelings from interfering with other things too much. |
| | 62. I went over in my mind what I would say or do. |

(table continues)

Scale Questionnaire Number and Coping Statement

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63. I thought about how a person I admire would handle the situation and used that as a model.

Scale 4: Seeking Social Support

8. Talked to someone to find out more about the situation.
18. Accepted sympathy and understanding from someone.
22. I got professional help.
31. Talked to someone who could do something concrete about the problem.
42. I asked a relative or friend I respected for advice.
45. Talked to someone about how I was feeling.

Scale 5: Accepting Responsibility

9. Criticized or lectured myself.
25. I apologized or did something to make up.
29. Realized I brought the problem on myself.
51. I made a promise to myself that things would be different next time.

Scale 6: Escape-Avoidance

11. Hoped a miracle would happen.
16. Slept more than usual.
33. Tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs or medication, etc.
40. Avoided being with people in general.
47. Took it out on other people.
50. Refused to believe that it had happened.
58. Wished that the situation would go away or somehow be over with.
59. Had fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out.

(table continues)

Scale Questionnaire Number and Coping Statement

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Scale 7: Planful Problem Solving

1. Just concentrated on what I had to do next - the next step.
26. I made a plan of action and followed it.
39. Changed something so things would turn out all right.
48. Drew on my past experiences; I was in a similar position before.
49. I knew what had to be done, so I doubled my efforts to make things work.
52. Came up with a couple of different solutions to the problem.

Scale 8: Positive Reappraisal

20. I was inspired to do something creative.
23. Changed or grew as a person in a good way.
30. I came out of the experience better than when I went in.
36. Found new faith.
38. Rediscovered what is important in life.
56. I changed something about myself.
60. I prayed.

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